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School and/or *madrasah* education

School and *madrasah* education: Gender and the strategies of Muslim young men in rural north India

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Summary

This paper explores the cultural and economic strategies of educated but un/under-employed young Muslim men aged between twenty and thirty-four in a village in western Uttar Pradesh, north India. Drawing on Connell's (1987) gender theory, the paper demonstrates how economic and political forces shape Muslim young men's strategies. The paper distinguishes between 'school-educated' men, some of whom had studied in *madrasabs* for long periods, and the '*madrasab*-educated'. Concentrating on school-educated men, we discuss their perceptions of education, and how these relate to their search for a respectable masculinity and what they regard as 'good work'. We also show how uneducated Muslim young men with alternative visions of education criticize the strategies of their educated peers. We use this account of Muslim young men's practices to emphasize the value of a culturally-sensitive political economy approach to the analysis of threatened masculinities.

School and/or *madrasah* education

The effects of liberalisation on employment opportunities are not experienced in a similar fashion by all of those in the labour market. Religion, urban-rural residence, region and educational achievements are only some of the other identifiers that cross-cut with gender to structure whether young people can get the jobs they are seeking, and if not, how they respond to such failures. In this paper we explore how Muslim young men in rural north India negotiate the educational opportunities available to them – in particular the state-provided and/or state-regulated schooling system on the one hand, and *madrasahs* on the other – and how they develop diverse gendered styles as they confront the public world of employment and politics.¹ We use data from our research in Qaziwala, a village 5 km from Bijnor town, in western Uttar Pradesh, north India, to argue that, while education *can* make many contributions to substantive freedoms (Drèze & Sen 1995: 14-15), power and culture mediate the role of education plays in young Muslim men's lives.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four main sections. In the first section we situate our work with reference to recent literature on youth cultures and masculinity. The next two sections form the empirical core of the paper and deal with Muslim young men's perceptions of education in rural Bijnor district and then with their attempts to acquire employment consistent with their sense of themselves as 'educated men'. The penultimate section considers the threat posed by the rise of a vociferous set of 'uneducated' young men in Qaziwala to the strategies of their educated peers. The conclusions draw out the wider relevance of our work for discussion of masculinities in marginalized parts of the world.

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School and/or *madrasah* education

Throughout the empirical sections of the paper we blend extended discussion of individual young men with wider reflections on our quantitative and qualitative fieldwork in order to convey how large-scale social processes cohere to produce human outcomes.

Masculinities in crisis?

Several recent ethnographies have stressed the importance of gender in shaping young people's practices, but discussion of masculinities in the global south has lagged behind analysis of women's position. Men are present in South Asian ethnography but the gendered nature of their behaviour is rarely problematized, and anthropologists have tended to present formal models of masculine behaviour that were not analyzed as products of gender power (Osella & Osella 2007: 7-9). Recent books on masculinities in Africa (Lindsay & Miescher 2003), Latin America (Gutmann 2003), and Asia (Chopra et al 2004) focus on the historical construction of normative masculinities and relationships between these ideal versions of manhood and 'masculinities in practice'. Drawing on Connell (1987) they investigate how boys *learn* to be men, and how powerful visions of masculinity shape this process. Research in South Asia shows that men may align their practices to normative masculinities in certain situations – such as job interviews or schoolrooms – but privately act in ways that depart substantially from idealized visions of manhood (Osella & Osella 2007). Masculinities are ordered in relations of hierarchy and dominance, and specific dominant masculinities characterize gender regimes in particular regional and historical contexts. These 'hegemonic masculinities' are "constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women" (Connell 1987: 183).

In contemporary South Asia we may be witnessing what Connell describes as a 'crisis moment' (Connell 1987). Several commentators have written of a disappearance of what little male adolescence the poor had in India, where rapid economic change and new health threats propel many impoverished children directly into paid work and the demands of adult

School and/or *madrasab* education

masculinity (Dyson 2007; Nieuwenhuys 1994; Verma & Saraswathi 2002). Young men may be forced to assume responsibilities in the home (Osella & Osella 2007: 40) and care for ill relatives, while simultaneously rationalizing and resisting their subordination within local masculine hierarchies. Connell's notion of 'crisis moments' can also apply to educated un/under-employed young men in India, whose experience of youth may often be increasingly drawn out over time (Parry 2005). Such men occupy ambivalent positions with reference to hegemonic masculinities: by dint of their education they conform to certain visions of successful manhood but they cannot assume male breadwinner roles (Osella & Osella 2007). Some Hindu young men have reacted to this ambivalence and its attendant threats to their sense of gendered competence by engaging in hyper-masculine violence (Hansen 1996), often oriented against Muslim minorities, especially Muslim women. Elsewhere, young men have responded to their marginalization within casual, short-term labour, for example in East Africa, through excessive alcohol consumption and sexual excess (Silberschmidt 2001); or in Mozambique and Madagascar by becoming 'feminized' in a certain sense (Agadjanian 2004; Cole 2005).

By contrast, the educated young Muslim men we studied in rural north India have typically responded to un/under-employment by continuing to search for 'respectable work' and investing in hegemonic visions of 'educated' and 'civilized' manhood. Inequalities on the basis of religious group membership inflect how these educated un/under-employed young men sustain styles of educated, 'civilized' manhood and perform urbane masculinities. They do so in relation to particular styles of femininity, especially visible when marriages are negotiated. We have written elsewhere about how *madrasabs* prepare Muslim girls for genteel adulthoods that complement the masculine practices we discuss here (Jeffery et al 2004, 2008).

We are especially interested in examining how the particular social, political and economic context in which young men live shapes their capacity to navigate specific moments of crisis. We examine this issue in part through paying attention to the economic, social and

School and/or *madrasah* education

cultural resources available to young men in the face of threats to their life projects. But we also seek to *ground* our analysis of masculinities with reference to issues of temporal change. For example, particular cultural practices may ‘work’ for a person during one historical moment or stage in a lifestyle, and then become unfamiliar or uncomfortable later (Ferguson 1999). People sometimes move in and out of specific masculine ‘styles’ over shorter periods, according to resources, mood, and context (e.g. Osella & Osella 2007). Thus, analyzed with reference to weeks or months, particular collective practices may appear coherent – as fully-formed identities – yet disappear over a longer time-scale. Conversely, identities that appear constant when analyzed over several years may, at a finer level of temporal analysis, be exposed as part of a montage of styles. These insights are germane to this paper, which examines the difficulties confronting young men in fulfilling visions of an educated masculinity that offer, in the short term, a measure of pride and self-respect.

Visions of progress through education: “mainstream” and madrasah schooling

Twenty-four in 2000 and unmarried, from a moderately well-off Sheikh family, Zamir spoke enthusiastically about his skill as a farmer, his involvement in a karate school, and his membership of a fitness centre in Bijnor town (for more details, see Jeffrey et al 2008b). He said he wanted to become “like the very best heroes” with a strong mind, powerful body and pure spirit.¹² Zamir’s restless energy marked him out from many of the other young Qaziwala men. His ‘typical day’ gives a sense of his dynamism. Rising at 5 a.m., he ran 8 km, returned to milk the family’s buffaloes, then worked on the land, drove and maintained the tractor, supervised labourers on the farm, checked on marketing arrangements, and kept accounts. At 10 a.m., he cycled to Bijnor for a computer class. At noon, he cycled back to Qaziwala to continue farming work. At 3 p.m., Zamir returned to Bijnor for karate practice followed by

¹² All personal names are pseudonyms. All quotes are taken from our fieldnotes, based on notes taken at the time, written up in Hindi within 24 hours and translated by one of the authors.

School and/or *madrasah* education

either an English or Advanced Accountancy tutorial, then cycled back to Qaziwala and studied. When we checked this ‘typical day’ with him, he grinned and said: ‘You have forgotten one thing – I never forget to pray five times a day.’

Zamir had acquired both religious (*dīnī tālīm*) and lengthy worldly education (*dunyā kī parhāi*). Whilst his family saw Hindi education as important for salaried employment, for reading documents, road signs, and instructions on medicine bottles, religious education was the source of morality, manners, and religious good practice. Zamir had attended a government primary school at the same time as a *madrasah*, where he learnt Urdu and memorised the *Qu’rān Sharīf*. But Zamir saw his future in ‘mainstream’ education, and completed his schooling at secondary schools and colleges in Bijnor. Yet he could not obtain government work, possibly because he neither had the social contacts nor the bribes demanded: about Rs. 40,000 [£500] for a police officer, to Rs. 400,000 for the post of District Magistrate, he told us. ‘Three things are necessary to get a salaried job: of most importance is money, then social contacts, then knowledge’, he said. If he failed to obtain a government post he would either work on his family farm or enter business: ‘One of my dreams is to leave the village, start a profitable business, and then come back to help Qaziwala. I would build a high school for the poor, improve all facilities, banish poverty.’ By the end of 2001, however, Zamir had started to explore opportunities in Delhi in embroidery or tailoring work either as an apprentice or small-scale entrepreneur.

Zamir’s family was wealthier than many in Qaziwala, and he played a bigger role in farming than most educated young men his age because of his father’s ill-health. Nevertheless, his case provides insights into the position and practices of educated Muslim young men in Qaziwala more broadly. Like many other Muslim villages, Qaziwala was not well supplied with Government schools: a small primary school 500 metres away served two other villages as well, and could accommodate only 10 percent of the relevant age-cohort. A large *madrasah* in Begawala, 1 km away, had over 1000 pupils in 2000, and a smaller *madrasah* was located on the

School and/or *madrasah* education

other side of Qaziwala. Small private Hindi-medium schools were established in the vicinity (one in Qaziwala itself) in the 1990s. For secondary schooling, children had to travel either 3 km north to a Government-aided school offering classes from grades 6 to 12 in Mandauli, or 5 km south to Bijnor town.³ Forty-five of the 425 Muslim young men in Qaziwala aged between twenty and thirty-four in 2000 had passed the Class 8 examination. We distinguish these 'school-educated' (many of whom, like Zamir, had also studied at a *madrasah*) from sixteen '*madrasah*-educated' young men who had less 'Hindi' schooling (at least five years) but had extensive *madrasah* education. Thirty-two of the 45 school-educated men were from households possessing more than 1 hectare of land, eight had less than 1 hectare, and five were landless or possessed very small plots. Most of the *madrasah*-educated Muslims came from households possessing more than 1 hectare of land.

Like Zamir, most of these young men had prolonged their schooling in the distant hope of obtaining a government job. None of the 15 or so school-educated young men who had applied for a government job had succeeded. Only three had managed to acquire a private service job. Some explained their failures away in terms of their lack of the necessary '*style*' and influence, but they also mentioned encountering religious discrimination. By 2002, upper caste Hindus in Bijnor commonly labelled school-educated Muslims as 'Osama types' or 'terrorists,' forms of stigma that reduced the chances of obtaining well-paid work in the informal economy. The sizeable Muslim middle class in Bijnor created some openings for enterprising rural Muslims with good educational qualifications, but such opportunities were scarce relative to those for Hindus from similar backgrounds. Even the richest Muslims lacked the social connections in local government bureaucracies required to get contracts on development projects or jobs in state offices.

School-educated Muslim young men in Qaziwala valorised education in general, but devalued local schools. They recalled their struggles to pass examinations, avoid harsh physical

³ For more details of secondary schooling patterns for Muslims in Bijnor town, see Jeffery et al (2007).

School and/or *madrasah* education

beatings, and move from one class to the next, speaking bitterly of the poor teaching aids, physical amenities, and absence of conscientious or inspirational teaching. They criticized government teachers for their absenteeism and tendency, when they did turn up, to abuse pupils and send them on errands. Teachers at the secondary schools also pressurised them into taking expensive private classes outside school. Several school-educated Muslims said that the schoolteachers discriminated against Muslims by delaying their progress through school and singling them out for humiliating punishments.

Rauf, 30 in 2001, the eldest son in a moderately wealthy Muslim household possessing two hectares of land, expressed the most intense frustration. Educated at a private primary school and Begawala *madrasah* and then at Mandauli inter-college, Rauf failed his Class 12 examinations twice. His father removed Rauf from school to help on the farm. Rauf failed two government job interviews in the late 1990s, and then helped his younger brother establish a small car repair workshop in Bijnor, but this business failed. In 2001, Rauf was farming in Qaziwala. His resentment arose partly from a feeling that his school education failed to provide useful skills and knowledge. He complained that his schoolteachers were “running a tuition racket” and refused to teach in class, and that facilities in rural schools were inferior to urban, English-medium institutions. He hated the gruelling and dirty agricultural work he had to do, and mixing with corrupt officials. He spent much time avoiding farming, channelling his energy instead into racing pigeons. His parents were appalled at his hobby, and made him establish a separate household. His father set Rauf’s share of the household’s harvest at just eight per cent. Rauf responded by refusing to work on the household farm. He supported himself and his family using money provided by his sympathetic father-in-law.

Generally, however, the school-educated un/under-employed Muslim young men were pragmatic and forward-looking. Zamir’s statement was greeted with many expressions of agreement:

School and/or *madrasah* education

If we don't get a salaried job, we just think that it is a matter of fate (*nasib*), fate (*taqdir*) [repeated loudly]! If, after so much study and so much trying, we still fail to get salaried work, we become sad and angry. When we sit together, we become frustrated about this sometimes; but this frustration only lasts ten or fifteen days. We soon get over these types of problems.

Young school-educated men's broadly positive orientations partly reflected their continued enthusiasm for a vision of progress through education. They typically referred to poverty and illiteracy as the forces confining many people to 'sub-human' or 'animal' lives. Despite poor occupational outcomes, these men believed they had benefited from studying Hindi and mainstream school subjects. Sometimes they contrasted mainstream schooling with Urdu-based, religious education taught within *madrasahs*, for example saying that *madrasahs* did not provide 'education'. The majority of school-educated young men referred to the benefits of education without specifying a particular type of knowledge or educational regime. For them, education in an abstract and ideal sense changes how people converse, move, eat, think and make choices in their lives.

Conversely, a few young *madrasah*-educated men claimed that only *madrasahs* could provide education in its fullest sense. Feroz, also a *madrasah* teacher, emphasized that only Islamic education instilled equanimity, tolerance, and respect, noting that *madrasah* students did not demonstrate and block roads, which causes problems for upright citizens taking relatives to hospital, for example: 'What kind of learning do you have if you are disrespectful to your elders and betters and don't listen to what they have to say?' Urdu-based learning instils knowledge of correct religious practices, moral (*akhlaqī*) lives, and civilized manners (*adab*). Indeed, he identified the *Qu' rān Sharif* as the locus of both religious and worldly knowledge, whereas school-based learning corrupted young people by instilling in them irreligious

School and/or *madrasah* education

patterns of thought, speech, and action.⁴ *Madrasah*-educated young men elaborated on the immorality of school education with reference to the linked themes of consumption and time. Some claimed that school-educated young men had become indoctrinated into a ‘false view’ of time and modernity by becoming embroiled in the pursuit of consumer goods to the neglect of reflection on the after-life. Feroz said:

We don’t want money in the bank or lots of good things in our house. We just think that we should be able to eat well and feed our children well. We think about today. We don’t think about tomorrow. Allah is the master of tomorrow. We don’t live only in this world; we also go to another world. We worry more about that world than about this world, [we worry about] where we will go after we die.

Men like Feroz were not arguing that Muslims should adhere to a former way of life, but that they should revitalize religious practices and systems of thought to distinguish themselves from the village ‘illiterates’ (*anparh*) and badly-behaved school-educated men alike. But the views of young men like Feroz must be read in context; the majority of *madrasah*-educated young men agreed with their school-educated peers that school education offers young men confidence, equanimity, and a measure of “*polish*” (they used the English word).

Maintaining an educated cultural style in manual labour and religious work

School-educated young men identified several ways to maintain an educated cultural style aside from entering white-collar employment. For example, one man told us:

Not everyone can get jobs in government service and not everyone can do that type of work. For this reason, education and employment are completely different things.

Education is not a means of earning money. Education opens people’s minds and

⁴ For a useful discussion of the efforts of Muslim educationalists to dissolve the distinction between worldly and religious knowledge, see Sikand (2005).

School and/or *madrasah* education

provides knowledge of good and bad behaviour. There are so many benefits associated with education that are not linked to getting a service job.

Other school-educated Muslim young men explicitly argued that ‘hand work’ was as socially necessary as ‘pen-work’. Nonetheless – as ‘educated people’ – it would be inappropriate for them to become daily wage labourers (*mazdūr*). Most had no aversion to contact with soil or machinery, but working under the regular supervision of a labour contractor and being paid a daily wage – and experiencing delays in payment, and the ubiquitous verbal and physical harassment – would be humiliating. Only three of the 45 school-educated Muslim young men aged between 20 and 34 in 2000 – and none of the *madrasah* educated – were in local daily wage labour. Instead, educated Muslim young men tended to enter either farming and artisanal work or religious forms of employment.

(a) *Farming and artisanal work*

Eight of the 45 school-educated Muslim young men in Qaziwala in 2000 came from fairly prosperous farming households and had become farmers. The wealthiest families ensured that their educated sons did not perform the most gruelling agricultural tasks. Within the richest household in Qaziwala, the eldest son, Dilshad, developed a style of ‘gentlemanly farming’. Dilshad would pick his way gingerly along field boundaries to avoid damaging his expensive Delhi-bought shoes, prodding the ground to check on soil quality and peering through dark glasses at the labourers’ progress. Most school-educated young men, however, had maintained a close connection with farming throughout their schooling, and few agreed with upper-caste Hindu urbanites who imagined agricultural labour as ‘dirty’ and backward.

In 2000, 20 of the 45 school-educated young men in the village were skilled artisans, in work they usually obtained through kinship and friendship connections: five were employed in Delhi, four in Bijnor town, four in Kashmir, three in Qaziwala, and four elsewhere. Tailoring,

School and/or *madrasah* education

machine embroidery and metalwork accounted for 14. Nine worked under bosses in small workshops and eleven were self-employed. After unpaid apprenticeships of between six months and two years, artisans could earn between Rs. 2000 and Rs. 6000 a month, compared to Rs. 1500 a month available to manual wage labourers in the village.

Sarfraz's example highlights key aspects of the artisans' experiences. Twenty and unmarried in 2000, Sarfraz grew up in a landless Muslim household. His father, Imtiaz, who sold cloth for a living, had decided to educate his children after observing older educated Muslim young men in Qaziwala obtaining government employment. Sarfraz took Classes 1-5 at the Qaziwala Government primary school whilst also studying Urdu and the *Qu' rān Sharif* at Begawala *madrasah*. He then enrolled at a government-aided inter-college in Bijnor for Classes 6-10. Sarfraz had failed to obtain low-ranking government employment in Bijnor, blaming his lack of social connections or the money to pay bribes. Sarfraz then joined a Muslim-run workshop in Bijnor, where he removed dents from cars and painted over the repaired bodywork. He was on a one-year, unpaid apprenticeship, and expected to earn Rs. 3000 a month afterwards. Sarfraz said he derived satisfaction from learning about the vehicles he repaired: he hoped to establish his own workshop in the future. Imtiaz had saved Rs. 50,000 to assist Sarfraz with the Rs. 200,000 required to establish a substantial workshop in Bijnor. Although both Imtiaz and Sarfraz expressed their opposition to demanding a dowry, Imtiaz appeared to hope that a portion of the remaining Rs. 150,000 would be obtained as dowry or a loan from Sarfraz's future wife's family. Sarfraz also hoped that his skills might provide opportunities to migrate to Delhi or Saudi Arabia. Sarfraz claimed that his education enabled him to do better than his uneducated peers: education, he said, allowed him to keep accounts, work diligently, and comport himself politely with customers.

As Sarfraz's case suggests, educated Muslim young men saw no contradiction between being educated and engaging in skilled manual employment. Rather, they associated artisanal

School and/or *madrasah* education

work with a type of genteel Islamic masculinity. They spoke of the dexterity, concentration and patience required for such work, which they typically considered less arduous and cleaner than other forms of manual employment. Some also argued that artisanal work entailed devoting their whole bodies to acts of labour and thereby inculcated forms of embodied discipline and 'virtuous toil'. Many also believed that by moving to urban centres to conduct skilled artisanal work they could reinforce their status as educated people engaged in 'progress'. Those engaged in skilled craftsmanship would return from Delhi with exciting stories of urban life. Some also boasted that their machine embroidery work was of 'export quality' and destined for foreign markets or that working on embroidery machines was like 'driving a car very fast.' Stepwise migration, whereby young men would move from Bijnor to Delhi, also contributed to the idea of artisanal work as part of a 'route' to the '*modern*', the word they used to refer to their lifestyle.

Sarfraz's parents also believed that investing in his education had enhanced his marriage prospects: education had, they said, improved Sarfraz's temperament, comportment and knowledge, such that he would be an attractive match for the parents of educated young women. They hoped that Sarfraz's future wife would help educate and bring up their future grandchildren well, and said that Sarfraz would be married to a relative (*rishtedār*) rather than outsiders because they would know the other party and there could be no trickery.

The case of Sarfraz also points to the connection that many educated Muslim young men made between 'being educated' and marrying well. As educated people, they would not only be able to marry a beautiful and accomplished young woman but also demonstrate the empathy and equanimity required of a good husband. These men rarely worried about their in-laws becoming frustrated if they failed to find government work, often because they had married (or expected to marry) within an extended kinship group. They also claimed that few Muslim parents expected young men to enter government work. As one man commented,

School and/or *madrasah* education

‘our in-laws realize that it is just a distant hope.’ Others also believed their craft occupations might allow them to migrate. Most educated young men channelled their energies into obtaining work in Bijnor, Delhi, or Kashmir, where Qaziwala Muslims had been migrating since the 1970s, and where they could draw on the social and financial support of friends and kin. But because it costs about Rs. 200,000 to negotiate entry into artisanal work in the Middle East, and many brokers trick young men, only two educated young men from wealthy Qaziwala households had gone abroad for embroidery work. Most men viewed their migration as temporary, claiming that they would return to Bijnor to establish their own businesses once they had sufficient wealth and experience – as indeed about one-third of the previous generation following this trajectory had done.

(b) Religious employment

One school-educated and three *madrasah*-educated men – all Sheikhs and from relatively wealthy households – aged between 20 and 34 in 2000 had entered religious employment as *maulvīs* (teachers in *madrasahs*) and one school-educated man taught Urdu on a temporary contract in a Government-aided school. Begawala *maulvīs* had social links to the *Daru’l ‘Ulum* seminary in Deoband; they groomed students for the entrance examinations at *Daru’l ‘Ulum* and three men had attended this seminary. Zamir’s brother Afroz was planning to follow such a career. He had received Hindi education up to Class 8 and Urdu-based education at a *madrasah* close to Bijnor. In 2002, this co-educational institution had roughly twenty teachers and 400 students. In addition to studying the *Qu’rān Sharif*, Urdu, Farsi and Arabic, its pupils could follow the standard UP School Board curriculum, including Hindi and English, at a primary and lower secondary school next door run by the same management. After showing aptitude for religious education, Afroz and his younger brother moved first to Begawala *madrasah* and then to a boarding *madrasah* in Delhi, where they followed a strict training, paying no fees. In 2001, while preparing for the Deoband seminary examinations,

School and/or *madrasah* education

Afroz told us that some school-educated Muslim young men teased peers like him who had left mainstream school to train as clerics by stroking long imaginary beards and calling out ‘Mullah! Mullah!’ Afroz saw nothing shameful about having mainstream qualifications yet still wanting to do religious work, which he perceived as a way of becoming reasonably prosperous, pursuing opportunities to live and travel outside Bijnor district, and obtaining peace of mind (*sukūn*).

Most *madrasah*-educated young men concurred with Afzal that religious work is preferable to secular white-collar employment. They contrasted the ‘straight’ system through which people obtain positions as clerics with the corruption, religious discrimination, and atmosphere of mistrust they encountered in searching for government work. Whereas people employed in state positions had to engage in bribery, illegal favouritism, and demeaning forms of flattery, *madrasah*-educated young men found security, independence, and peace of mind in religious work. Most *madrasah*-educated young men perceived religious work a prize obtained through conscientious labour and the blessings of *Allah*, not ‘fallback’ employment to be pursued in the absence of secular white-collar work.

Counter-narratives of ‘uneducated’ men

The attempts of educated young Muslim men to develop appropriate strategies in response to unemployment must be read alongside the ambivalence of uneducated young men about the value of education. Of the 425 young men aged between 20 and 34 in Qaziwala in 2000, 364 (86 per cent) had neither passed the examinations at the end of junior high school (eight years of schooling, at age 12-14) nor extended *madrasah* qualifications.⁵ Among these ‘uneducated’ young men, 44 per cent worked as manual wage labourers, 39 per cent were skilled artisans, and 16 per cent were in business, mainly cattle trade and butchery. Twenty-eight per cent of these ‘uneducated’ men had *some* experience of formal education. A few had

⁵ These figures differ from those presented in Jeffrey et al. (2008a), which do not include non-residents.

School and/or *madrasah* education

chosen to leave formal education, for example because of the difficulty of obtaining white-collar employment or because they were repeatedly beaten by teachers. But their parents had curtailed their studies, either because of the costs involved, or because the young men had themselves demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm and/or failed to achieve good results.

These men had internalized a vision of themselves as ‘illiterate’ (*an-parh*, *ku-parh*). They typically echoed their educated peers by arguing that education provides key skills, knowledge, and civilization. Influenced by wider narratives celebrating the benefits of education, and citing their difficulties in negotiating urban settings without school skills, many uneducated young men said they regretted their limited schooling.

Afzal’s example is illuminating. A twenty-three year old carpenter, Afzal lived with his wife and young son. His parents owned no agricultural land and they could not afford to educate all their seven sons. They nonetheless encouraged Afzal to attend the Begawala *madrasah* up to Fifth Class and the Mandauli inter-college for a year. But Afzal left school at the beginning of Seventh Class, saying that he had learnt very little and was illiterate. He now regretted leaving school, citing his inability to read banknotes as an example of how his illiteracy exposed him to everyday humiliation. Other uneducated men acknowledged the relative competence of educated young men in public settings, and the shame of being unable to read English or Hindi. They spoke dejectedly of their failure to obtain educational credentials and of the poverty, bad luck, and personal disinterest that had conspired to exclude them from formal education. Some said that as uneducated people they were ‘no better than animals’, ‘like buffaloes’ or ‘people leaning against a wall’.

Yet uneducated young men, like their educated peers, were also engaged in a quest for respect that often involved shifting between different positions and styles. For example, Afzal questioned the idea that he is inevitably ‘inferior’ to educated people, and he bragged about the strength he had developed as a carpenter, showed off his biceps, and recounted with glee his alleged superiority in physical combat. Afzal contrasted his power and daring with the

School and/or *madrasah* education

feebleness and timidity of educated people. Stuck inside, ‘bent over their pen and paper’, he said that ‘those book insects’ lose strength and vitality, cannot consume oily or spicy foods, cannot work hard for long periods, nor defend themselves or their families. Consistent with his vision of macho masculinity, Afzal proudly recalled damaging teachers’ chairs and misbehaving during classes. Unlike many others, he was never afraid during the beatings that followed. Afzal concluded that ‘the educated are weak and the uneducated are strong.’

Other uneducated young men ridiculed their better educated peers, referring to them in unflattering terms, for example as ‘lost in thought’. They spoke of the educated man’s lack of experience and practical knowledge: the ‘foolishness of the educated’. Many affirmed a type of rural machismo based on the strength and experience built up within strenuous labour. These men commonly said that the educated are incapable of the sustained manual work required to be effective farmers. For them, Zamir’s gym work-outs could not compensate for his relative remove from the dirty business of ‘soil work’.

Uneducated young men acknowledged that schooling changes people’s relationship to nature. But they believed that this *undermined* rather than *affirmed* a young man’s moral stature and masculinity. Drawing on local notions of beauty as having a fair soft skin, an uneducated man told Craig: ‘If we lived in as much comfort, then we would also become handsome like you. But if we didn’t work in the fields then where would the grain come from?’ Some spoke of their pride in work with the ‘dust and soil’. Others said that the educated lack the dexterity for working with wood, cloth, and metal. Uneducated young men who were artisans in Delhi also occasionally ridiculed the failure of educated people to make money: indeed, their own withdrawal from secondary school had enabled them to earn substantial amounts from a young age, and they returned to the village wearing expensive clothes to taunt their ‘impoverished’ educated peers.

Contra Afzal, several young men and some of their parents claimed that illiteracy was no disadvantage in daily life: they could negotiate urban settings with confident ease, and were

School and/or *madrasah* education

unabashed by their lack of schooling. They emphasized their common sense, practical wisdom, and capacity to improvise (*jugār*) when needing to decipher written texts or make rapid calculations. In addition, some contested the notion that literacy and numeracy are only available in schools or *madrasahs*, saying that they had developed ‘oral arithmetic’ (*munh-ḡabānī hisāb*) and could read road signs through hard work, experience, or games. Such views were less common among the uneducated than were ideas of formal education as progress, but they constituted an important alternative village discourse.

Educated young men countered the taunts from the uneducated: even if the educated had been unable to acquire salaried employment, at least they had avoided the least attractive work. But, uneducated young men observed, the ability of the educated to avoid manual wage labour reflected their households’ greater wealth more than the capacity of local educational systems to provide skills, knowledge and confidence relevant for entering ‘better’ employment. Moreover, many uneducated young men were working in the same types of employment as the educated, often more successfully. Educated young men working in farming and artisanal work often asserted that their education allowed them to perform their tasks more effectively than the uneducated. Some stressed their capacity to practise ‘scientific’ agriculture that the uneducated would fail to understand. Others, working as artisans, claimed to have expansive social networks from school that left them better placed than unschooled men to advance craft careers. These claims may have lacked substance, but they were important in giving the educated a sense of their distinction.

The optimism and relative absence of resentment evident among educated Muslim young men suggests that they were mostly successful in countering the threat posed by uneducated critics. Their intention to invest heavily in their children’s education also points to their confidence in education’s benefits. But they had largely failed to convince other villagers of the value of prolonged mainstream schooling. Their failure to obtain better paid or more prestigious employment had persuaded many village parents to moderate their views of the

School and/or *madrasah* education

benefits of mainstream schooling, increasingly referring to the impossibility of Muslims' obtaining government employment and the consequent irrelevance of investing in secular schooling. If all the salaried jobs go to Hindus, and so few young Muslim men with degrees have obtained a salaried job, what is the point in studying?

Such perceptions were already important in limiting the expansion of education in Qaziwala in the 1980s and 1990s. But narratives of mainstream schooling as 'useless' had become more common in the village in the early 2000s. Hindu political mobilization in the 1990s and early 2000s powerfully influenced the willingness of educated Muslim young men to migrate in search of work and complicated their attempts to obtain government or private white-collar employment. Many young men felt that they should concentrate on small-scale artisanal work locally or on acquiring work as a cleric. Furthermore, the heightening of religious communal tension in north India during the 1990s and again since 2001 meant that those with religious education who also demonstrated their religious commitment through clothing or beards experienced increasing examples of state and private discrimination against them in their everyday lives.

Conclusions

In the face of competing demands upon their meagre resources, and an unpromising employment market, many parents planned futures for their sons outside mainstream schooling. In addition, Muslim boys themselves were increasingly leaving formal education before Eighth Class. Our study shows that, more often than not, higher levels of *madrasah* and mainstream education are not correlated with significantly higher levels of access to economic resources.⁶ But Muslims were not straightforwardly 'rejecting' prolonged mainstream schooling as a mode of social mobility in the early 2000s: rather they were ambivalent about the purposes of education. They differed markedly in their perceptions of the benefits of

⁶ We are grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging us to draw out this point.

School and/or *madrasah* education

mainstream schools, and the same people expressed different views on separate occasions, even within the same conversation. While such ambivalence is a common feature of people's discussions of education in numerous contexts, the rise of educated un/under-employment had lent a particular force to villagers' sense of uncertainty.

The cultural and economic strategies of educated Muslim young men in Qaziwala are not so very different from those of their educated Hindu peers in rural Bijnor district.⁷ Many school-educated Muslim young men aspired to enter the (mainly Hindu) government bureaucracy. Moreover, most Muslim young men responded to their exclusion from government employment in the early 1990s and 2000s by reaffirming the value of education. They typically possessed economic resources and social connections that allowed them to negotiate educated un/under-employment fairly effectively. Some had fallen back on farming, while others drew on social networks linking them to urban co-religionists engaged in artisanal work. They redefined farming or skilled artisanal employment as 'educated work' and stressed how their own education allowed them to perform such occupations better. Still others placed greater emphasis on *madrasah* education and worked as teachers or clerics. Muslim young men with a 'mixed' education from landowning families, in addition to those exclusively educated in *madrasahs*, were able to capitalize on the existence of religious networks linking Qaziwala's *madrasahs* to larger Islamic educational institutions. In the context of stable or growing demand for *madrasah* education and increasing investment in *madrasahs* from outside India, religious employment is an important zone of expanding economic opportunity. A sense of Muslims as a distinct social group is therefore both imposed 'from above' and actively cultivated by people in local settings.

Parents also faced some pressures to invest more in the education of their sons. Tiny numbers of Qaziwala girls were educated to 8th class or beyond in mainstream schooling, but girls were increasingly likely to attend a *madrasah*, often for 5 or more years. While this

⁷ For more details, see Jeffrey et al (2008a).

School and/or *madrasah* education

education did not prepare them for employment (very few were competent in Hindi when they left the *madrasah*) they did expect to be married to a man with at least as much education, and these men were in short supply in the village. Poorly educated young men found it hard to attract a bride from a respectable family.

Because educated Muslim men constituted only a tiny proportion of the overall cohort of young Muslim men in Qaziwala, alternative discourses found ready proponents, questioning the resources and moral authority of the educated, and dwelling on the ‘weakness’ of the educated and their disconnection from the realities of village life. Educated young men could neutralize this threat to their respect, but the alternative narratives were important in encouraging some Muslim boys to drop out of school and in leading many parents to reassess their approach to educating their children. Rather, than uncovering neat hegemonic and oppositional masculinities (Connell, 1987), our study points to the existence of varied styles of being successfully male in rural Bijnor district that individual Muslim young men move ‘in’ and ‘out’ of over time.

Two broader points emerge from this study. First, our work highlights the central importance of ideas of education in the gendered strategies of educated and uneducated young men alike (cf. Levinson & Holland 1996). School education acts as a type of leitmotif for a particular vision of modern mobility, while *madrasah* education offers an alternative vision of gendered success. Some young men in western UP also emphasize how education can occur outside formal institutions, for example through apprenticeships.

Second, we have shown how political, economic and social forces shape the capacity of young men to manage economic liberalization. Young men’s attempts to recover a sense of masculine prowess are diverse because they have different aims in life and respond to similar pressures in varied ways. Moreover, there are class differences among Muslims in Qaziwala. But, on the whole, Muslim young men’s particular type of social capital – especially networks of trust based on religion and kinship – do not lead them into ‘mainstream’ employment and

School and/or *madrasah* education

their economic capital, in the form of modest agricultural landholdings, provides insufficient resources to invest in new forms of off-farm employment. Against this background, most educated Muslim young men pursued a strategy of withdrawal which served, in turn, to reinforce closed circles of distinction. In emphasizing these points, our paper provides a counterpoint to the more discursively-oriented work on gender and masculinity in South Asia. Our work highlights a need for a culturally-sensitive political economy approach to an understanding of youth masculinities (see also Jeffrey et al., 2008a). Such an approach is resolutely attentive both to broader structures of power that shape the choices of rural Muslims *and* to more apparently ‘mundane’ issues related to style, dignity and everyday performance.

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